

May 2018

# City & Guilds and AELP T Level Work Placements Research

## Foreword

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**Kirstie Donnelly MBE, Managing Director  
City & Guilds Group**

The UK is in the grip of a skills crisis that is affecting many of our industries and impacting productivity, growth and ultimately the bottom lines of businesses across the country. Recent City & Guilds Group research found that 9 out of 10 employers struggle to recruit the skilled people they need and that skills gaps are the biggest single concern for UK businesses.

So, what's the issue? It's a multifaceted problem, but key is that for many years there has been too great a focus on academic education in the UK which has created an imbalance in the skills we are creating compared to the needs of the labour market. The Government has recognised this and has sought to address it by reforming the professional and technical education system in the UK, introducing the new apprenticeship system and the forthcoming T Levels, which will be offered in 11 industry sectors.

For the uninitiated, T Levels are a new technical qualification set to be introduced from 2020, in three industries, with the rest to follow in the coming years. T Levels are billed as an alternative to A Levels and a high-quality route through to employment, higher education or apprenticeships. Whilst the need to provide a high-quality technical education offer for young people is undisputed, there are some essentials the Government must get right if T Levels are to be a success. Key amongst these is the mandatory 45 – 60 day work placement embedded into each T Level, making up the focus of this research.

The Government is absolutely right in suggesting that this work placement is critically important in preparing young people for the workplace. If a young person is, for example, working in the Construction sector, substantial experience of working on a real building site means that they are far more prepared to head straight into work when they complete their studies.

However, many in both the education sector and the business world have already sounded alarm bells about the viability of delivering the work placement in practice, without significant support from Government. It is thought that the T Levels will increase the number of work placements required to 180,000 per year, a huge uplift in what is being delivered currently. In addition, the extended length of the work placement is an enormous step change from what is happening in industry today, with most employers only offering a week or two of work experience. To add to this, colleges and training providers only have small numbers of people responsible for facilitating work placements, so they will need to reorganise, train and possibly even recruit to meet demand.

There are reasonable concerns about the number of obstacles that need to be overcome to ensure that this important element of the T Levels succeeds. Whilst it's extremely positive that Government has asked for the opinion of employers and the Further Education sector in its recently released consultation, it's essential that their concerns are truly considered and addressed.

I firmly believe that the extended work placement is a vitally important part of the T Levels, which is why we decided to carry out this research to really get to grips with the issues that employers and providers might face, and support Government in addressing them.

T Levels have the potential to help improve the employability of young people and reduce skills gaps and skills shortages in this country, but only if they are given proper support and implemented correctly. Let's put the right resources behind them to make them a success and give the UK the quality technical education offer we so desperately need.



*Kirstie Donnelly MBE*

**Managing Director – City & Guilds Group**

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**Mark Dawe, Chief Executive  
Association of Employment and Learning Providers**

The Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP) strongly supports the introduction of T Levels and this is why we were pleased to partner City & Guilds in researching the views of employers, FE Colleges and training providers on what ministers are describing as 'a revolution in technical education'. It is important that these views are taken on board if T Levels are to be introduced to a consistently high standard.

High-quality work placements are fundamental to the success of T Levels, and in particular apprenticeship providers of all types are ready to use their capacity and established relationships with employers to give young people a great opportunity to start developing the skills they need in the workplace. We can anticipate that many of the colleges, sixth forms and UTCs who offer T Levels will need and want to partner with apprenticeship providers to ensure that this outside-of-the-classroom part of the curriculum succeeds. In addition, many independent training providers already deliver innovative employer-centric study programmes and they, along with other apprenticeship providers, will add to the high-quality offer available to our young people.

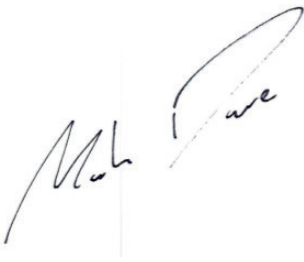
The encouraging results from this survey show that a very high proportion of employers are willing to play a greater part in helping T Level learners to apply their learning in workplace settings, so there is clear support for the overall aspirations of the proposals. This is not to underestimate the challenge, also confirmed by the research, of raising general awareness among employers about the introduction and purpose of T Levels.

The research findings also demonstrate that the 45-60 day length of the work placements, which was confirmed in the Government's response to its consultation on 27th May 2018, will bring new challenges but, again, there is an encouraging level of will on the part of employers to make them work. We will be moving from a position in some previous Government employment and skills programmes where, to put it bluntly, employers were being given the chance to 'try before you buy' to a new credible learning experience which make a significant

difference to a young learner's skills, knowledge and behaviours. It is no surprise though that a key finding from this research, which we strongly support, is that we should be basing work placements around a common core of expected content, with a degree of flexibility allowed on top of this.

The findings and recommendations raise the issue of financial support for employers and learners and for us this links back to whether T Levels will support the ministerial drive to improve social mobility. We are therefore encouraged that in the Government's response, ministers have recognised the importance of reviewing the available pathways to a young person achieving level 2 and progressing from it.

Our message is simple: carry on listening to the sensible and constructive voices such as those that participated in this research and T Levels will establish themselves as a vital part of our education landscape.



*Mark Dawe*

**Chief Executive - Association of Employment and Learning Providers**

## Introduction

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### T Levels – the background

In the budget of March 2017, the Government announced the introduction of a new suite of occupationally-related qualifications to directly reflect the needs of industry. The timetable for the rollout of "T Levels" expects the first teaching in Education, Digital and Construction to take place in September 2020, with full teaching of T Levels across 11 sector routeways by 2022.

- » Digital
- » Construction
- » Education and childcare
- » Legal, finance and accounting
- » Engineering and manufacturing
- » Health and science
- » Hair and beauty
- » Agriculture, environment and animal care
- » Business and admin
- » Catering and hospitality
- » Creative and design



Completion of any T Level must include a 45 – 60 day period of mandatory work placement with an employer. The Department for Education believes around 180,000 such placements will ultimately be required across all sectors each year, a major shift upwards from current levels.

### Work placements are too critical to fail

Work placements are in fact the single most crucial element towards the success of T Level proposals – the principle of "no work placement, no T Level" works equally well from the perspective of both the individual learner and the system as a whole. The introduction of suitable high-quality work placements is therefore fundamental to the success of the T Level proposals, and when working to such a tight timetable for implementation, it is vital that every opportunity is taken to identify the challenges that implementation may present.

## Our research

AELP and City & Guilds are therefore very pleased to have collaborated on this research project to investigate work placements:

- » to examine their purpose and current practices;
- » to understand the challenges that may be faced in introducing the range and volume of work placements now required;
- » and to make recommendations based on our findings and experience of how to give the proposals the best chance of success.

This research was undertaken through surveys of training providers and FE colleges and employers across England, and through examination of ten detailed case studies of providers and employers who are already engaged with the concept of work experience and work placements.

**Our findings draw on the collective experience of AELP who represent apprenticeship providers with extensive experience of delivering work-based learning, and of awarding organisation City & Guilds who have experience of the design and delivery of similar qualifications via their TechBac qualifications.**



## The key findings

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### **We found a promising degree of goodwill in the system towards the proposals.**

Very positively, almost three-quarters of the employers surveyed were willing to play a greater part in helping students to apply their learning in workplace settings, providing they receive appropriate support from Government, so there is clear support for the overall aspirations of the proposals.

### **Half of employers rated their understanding of T Levels as poor vs only 17% rating it as good**

However, levels of understanding are at best mixed - almost half of the employers who were aware of T levels rated their level of understanding as 'poor', and just 17% as 'good'. This compared to training providers where almost half (46%) felt that their understanding was good compared to a quarter (23%) who believed that their understanding was poor.

### **Currently 71% of employers only offer 1 – 2-week work placements, a 45 – 50 days (or 16 week) placement will be a huge step change in comparison**

There is also a clear difference between the length of work placements now and the plans for the T Levels. Our research found that most employers currently only offer placements of one week (40%) or two weeks (31%). This will be a huge step change for employers and they have stated that support and guidance about how to deliver will be needed.

### **And three-quarters of training providers only delivered work placements of two weeks or less**

The most common duration of work placements/experience colleges and training providers deliver for 16-19 year olds is a week. Indeed, just under three quarters of respondents said the average for their learners is two weeks or less.



Encouragingly though, 40% of employers recognised that 40 – 60 days would be needed to demonstrate key occupational components of entry level roles with a further 30% stating it should be longer than 60 days. Little over half (55%) of training providers agreed that 45 to 60 days was suitable, with an additional 24% stating that it should take longer. This suggests that they are both on the same page on this issue.

**Our findings suggest a degree of flexibility will be required in the design of work placements in each sector – certainly in the early stages – rather than imposing a flat "one-size-fits-all" solution.**

Notably employers and training providers working in the Construction sector said it would take longer than 45-60 days to successfully deliver a T Level placement. Given the repeated concerns expressed by both training providers and employers regarding work placements in this sector, this gives rise to concern as to whether continuing plans for the early rollout of T Levels in construction is the best course of action to follow.

**Only 8% of employers currently offer placements of the duration required for T Levels.**

In addition, employers take very few work placements students currently, with 4% of respondents telling us they don't take any; a fifth (21%) telling us that they take one per year; 16% taking two per year and 20% taking three - five per year. **This means that two thirds of employers currently take just five work experience students or less per year.**

Current capacity in the system therefore falls short of what is required - only 8% currently offer placements of the duration required for T-levels. Two thirds of providers and the majority of employers would also welcome a framework of mandatory content from each work placement with some flexibilities for employers to specify particular needs.

**Greater Government communication will be critical**

47% of training providers told us that they got their information about T Levels from Awarding Organisations (such as City & Guilds) with just 16% stating that they received information from Government. Considering the poor level of employers understanding it's clear that Government must do more to spread the word about the T Levels.

## 9 out of 10 employers want financial support to deliver the quantity of T Level work placements required

It was clear that the financial viability of T Level placements is a key concern – there is a sharp focus on the costs to the employer (in terms of any direct financial support to the learner, or the indirect costs of staff time and support) and 85% of our respondents stated that they would like financial support to enable them to increase the number of work placements. In addition, there were fundamental concerns from providers around the impact of funding learner travel and other placement expenses on the viability of offering provision at all, so it was good to see this addressed in the Government's recent consultation.

## What are the work placements for? – Recruitment? Or learning?

Our supporting desk research found that, in addition, there was a stark difference in the rationale for work placements than the intention for T Level proposals. T Levels present work placements as a vehicle to facilitate skills development amongst young people, but currently they are used by most employers as recruiting tools rather than as a vehicle to build those skills further. This was described by one case study respondent as a "long format job interview" and this concept is clearly widely recognised.

## The relationship between apprenticeships and T Levels must be more clearly articulated

There is also concern about the relationship between T Levels and apprenticeships – both whether the availability of work placements would reduce apprenticeship opportunities, and how progression from one to the other could be achieved. **The relationship between apprenticeships and T Levels must be more clearly articulated**, both for T Levels to have worth with learners and employers, and to ensure that these strands of provision complement rather than adversely impact on each other.

## Geographical spread of T Level placement will be a challenge

We also clearly identified a range of specific challenges to the introduction of extended work placements. The greatest of these are widely agreed to be finding enough placements locally within reach of public transport, but there are specific – usually regulatory - issues relating to sectors. 89% of training providers stated that the transport links and access were going to be a challenge followed by 88% who believed the location of the

work placement would present a challenge. This was followed by 48% of employers who stated that they saw transport links, access or cost as being a challenge.

### ▶ Construction sector foresee many barriers to work placement

A very wide range of occupations were identified as having particular barriers of one sort or another to work placements for young people, but Construction was most commonly cited as an area of difficulty in this respect - of particular interest given the early placing of this sector in the timetable for the roll-out of T Levels.

### ▶ 8 out of 10 employers want a framework of content for work placements

A recurring theme emerged that the currency of T Levels would be best enhanced by basing work placements around a common core of content, with a degree of flexibility allowed on top of this according to, for example, the sector and size of employer with 83% of employers telling us that this was their preference. This would help to ensure quality is maintained whilst maximising the opportunities for placements in any particular area. Two thirds of training providers (66%) agreed with the employer view on this issue.

### **Good communications required to build awareness and understanding about the purpose, benefits and requirements of T Levels**

All of the above suggests that Government must play a very active role in communicating the benefits, intent and purpose of the T Level proposals, building awareness of the requirements, and the capacity for the required numbers and duration of work placements, particularly in the early years of implementation.

## Our recommendations

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Clear recurring themes emerge from across all strands of this research which policy-makers need to seriously consider as they formulate the shape of the work placement element of the T Level proposals. This leads us to the following conclusions;

- 1. There is a constructive attitude across the post-16 sector and across employers to the aims and aspirations of the T Level proposals.**

*However, this should not disguise the scale of the challenges faced in implementing the volume and quality of work placements being envisaged by the proposals.*

- 2. To ignore how employers currently use work experience placements risks the engagement of the very organisations whose support is vital for the proposals to succeed.**

*The concept of combining the widely-recognised use of work placements as a "long format job interview" with active skills training, is however one that both employers and providers seem generally receptive to working with.*

- 3. A clearer articulation and communication of the rationale and purpose of T Levels, as well as the benefits to the employer, is required to ensure that the vital engagement of employers is secured.**

*In particular, the relationship between T Levels and apprenticeships must be clarified to ensure they complement each other and build on previous success.*

- 4. The wide range of challenges to the establishment of work placements suggest a degree of flexibility will be required in the design of work placements in each sector, if not in each occupation.**

*A flat "one-size-fits-all" prescription is unlikely to succeed.*

- 5. The repeated range of concerns expressed by respondents regarding work placements in the Construction sector gives rise to concerns as to whether the early rollout of T Levels in this sector is the best course of action follow.**

- 6. Potential financial support for both employers and learners must be seriously considered if viable placements are to be made available in the numbers required.**

*There is a danger that the scale of work placements required under the T Level proposals may have a detrimental effect on the labour market for 16-18-year olds by restricting paid opportunities including apprenticeships, which will offset any gains the T Level proposals may create.*

- 7. A comprehensive national support programme for both employers and providers is required for T Level work placements to be successful in a range of sectors and locations.**

*This must include serious consideration of the need for financial support to both learners and employers for the period of work placement.*



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